

# Not Quite North Shore

By Jim Szczepaniak

“How’s life in Skokie?” my cousin Walt asks. “Great,” I say. I haven’t lived in Skokie for 14 years. Over the past decade, I’ve told this cousin any number of times, “We don’t live in Skokie anymore. We’re in Morton Grove, the next town west.” But I’ve stopped bothering to correct him.

I worked for the Village of Skokie for years, so lots of my relatives and acquaintances think I live there. Which is fine with me because Skokie’s a great community. Most Chicago-area people have some idea where Skokie is. Not as many know Morton Grove. Which is also fine by me because I consider it a little-known gem.

During the great Exodus to the suburbs in the 1950s and early ’60s, my town was jokingly called Mortgage Grove, a punny reference to its reputation as a sleepy bedroom community for first-time homeowners. In many ways the stereotype is still true, despite the alarming number of brick ranch houses that are being torn down on their postage-stamp-sized lots to be replaced by McMansion wannabes. So I am amused when Liz, who lives in Indiana, asks, “How’s life on the North Shore?” This relative knows my wife and I live north of the city, that we frequently see movies with subtitles and that we like trying different ethnic food. For her, that adds up to us living on the North Shore. And why should I argue otherwise?

Some people get overly hung up on the class aspect of such geographic distinctions. Like those who want to live in the part of Skokie that has a 60203 ZIP code so they can tell people they live in Evanston. Or the former co-worker who, when I saw him for the first time in a few years, expressed surprise that I hadn’t “traded up” to a home in a tonier community. Or the Winnetka woman I recently met at a seminar. When I answered her question about where I live, she actually replied, “Morton Grove. How quaint.”



But the way I figure it, I’ve got the best of both worlds. My property taxes are half of what they would be for a similar house in Evanston and multiples less than the shoreline communities further north — assuming you could even find an 1,800-square-foot, three-bedroom ranch in Kenilworth.

Yet I’m only a 10-minute drive from Lake Michigan, from Evanston’s great music festivals, from the free summer concerts in Wilmette’s Gilson Park. I’m two blocks from the Edens Expressway, so I can be in downtown Chicago in 20 minutes if it’s not rush hour. Assuming traffic is too snarled to drive, I’m five minutes away from both the Metra train and the Skokie Swift, which takes me non-stop to the CTA’s Red Line. Morton Grove has fine schools, excellent municipal services and safe neighborhoods with a wide variety of housing stock on well-maintained properties. Despite the occasional controversy, such as whether the Muslim Community Center in my neighborhood should be allowed to build a mosque there, the community overall seems strengthened by its impressive ethnic and religious diversity.

Depending on my taste at the moment, I’m within minutes of two authentic German delis, several excellent Polish buffets with enough sausages and starches to provision a starving army,

Korean restaurants where you grill your own meat at the table, and the full gamut of Indian and Pakistani cuisine in the feel-like-you-are-there atmosphere of Devon Avenue. If I kept kosher or ate according to the Muslim rules of Halal, I am within walking distance of the right stores and restaurants. And I never thought I’d get excited about produce, but I was thrilled to find I’m a short drive away from some of the best stores around for fruit, vegetables and meat. The crowds can get a bit daunting, but thanks to all those shoppers, the food turns over fast, so it’s almost always fresh, and the prices are half what you’d pay at the leading grocery chains. With all the money I’m saving by living in Morton Grove, I can get in 18 holes at the Chick Evans golf course, which many duffers consider the best public course in the region, for just \$27. It’s less than five minutes from my house. And I’ll have enough left over to treat my wife to that hard-to-find indie film at the Wilmette Theater. If we go to a matinee, it’ll set me back all of \$10. For both of us. So yes, Liz. Life is good on the — not quite — North Shore.

*Jim Szczepaniak is thrilled about his new job as Community Relations Director for Niles Township High School, which is — almost — on the North Shore.*